

Tips for Handling Difficult People

There are many people out there with whom you will find it difficult to communicate and work due to their behaviour. For example, you might experience conflict between individuals, within teams and between different teams. Here are some common types of difficult people you might encounter and practical techniques you might like to try to deal with them.

First and foremost, general advice for improving your assertiveness will assist you in dealing with any difficult situation: [1]

- Generate a positive inner dialogue.
- Get clear in your own mind your position on the matter, and construct assertive words and phrases. In this case, you may need a second or two to compose your thoughts. Starter words such as 'Well ...' or asking for clarification can give you vital seconds.
- Actively listen to gain understanding and empathise with the other person's point of view.
- Use steady, clear and direct verbal communication.
- Make sure your body language is confident, open and unthreatening.
- Ensure your facial expressions complement your messages.
- Maintain good eye contact.

Stress relief

When faced with a difficult person or situation, your stress levels will inevitably rise. Anxiety can produce noticeable signs of your negative emotions, and your communication can suffer as a result. You can practise quick stress relieving exercises to keep you calm during stressful communication. Below are some techniques.

1. Have you ever massaged the palm of your hands when feeling tense? There is a pressure point in the centre of your palms, which can be a great tension reliever if pressed or massaged. However, this technique is unlikely to have dramatic stress relieving powers in highly charged situations.
2. Breathe in, clench all your muscles as tightly as you can and hold this for five seconds. Quickly release the tension and breathe out as you do so. Relax as much as you can.
3. Hold the palms of your hands together with your elbows out. Breathe in and let the air out slowly. As you breathe out, tighten the muscles around your diaphragm (the lower end of your rib cage). Relax at the end of exhalation. This will help you to calm down and also to prevent that nervous tremble in your voice.

Why won't they calm down?

Often our natural reaction is to meet aggression with aggression, but this only serves to escalate already difficult situations. However, on the other hand, passive behaviour may result in you being taken advantage of.

To try to handle an angry person, it is important to distance yourself from the immediacy of the situation. Do this by telling yourself that the anger is not directed at you as a person, but at something you have done or failed to do, or a stance you have taken.

It may seem that the best approach is to talk to the person in a calm and composed manner. This may work, but it is just as likely to make them more frustrated. To overcome this, you could try the technique of mirroring. [2]

Mirroring is based on the idea that people who get on well with each other unconsciously mirror each other's gestures and actions. You can use this to relate to others as it shows empathy and thus aids communication. It is important that the other person does not know you are doing this as they may see it as manipulation or even mockery. You must be subtle and use this technique only as an aid to communication, not for manipulation.

Method: alter your position slightly and slowly to align it with the position of the other person. Do not directly copy their actions. Alter your facial expression to be in tune with theirs. You probably do this naturally during everyday interactions. For example, if a friend is telling you a story in which they were angry, you might find yourself scowling a little.

You can increase the volume and pitch of your voice to match that of the other person. This is a way of acknowledging verbally that the anger is there. Gradually lower the volume and pitch as the situation progresses. When the heat has gone from the situation, you will be able to express your point of view and negotiate more successfully.

Steps for managing anger [3]

- Construct a clear inner dialogue.
- Ask for clarification ('So you're saying ...').

- Demonstrate empathy and state your point of view ('I understand why you are annoyed. I don't believe that was the case, but I'd like to hear why you think it is').
- Only step up your assertion if the other person remains aggressive. You may do this by increasing the emphasis on your position ('I don't agree').
- If you begin to feel frustrated, resentful or annoyed, you may like to express this ('It makes me feel frustrated when you ...' or 'I'd like to sort out ...').
- If the discussion remains heated, you may have to resort to statements such as: 'this discussion is not constructive; I will talk to you tomorrow'.

Why won't they leave?

You are very busy, but you have to deal with someone who just won't leave. Tapping your watch will either not be recognised as a hint, or the other person will feel embarrassed and guilty.

One approach is to wait until a suitable pause and say something like, 'It's been great to exchange ideas, but I have to make a call'. Another way is to use body language, by getting up, offering a hand, and walking past them to the door.

Why won't they get to the point?

Some people may offer you a long and convoluted dialogue before actually reaching their point. This can be very distracting, and you may find yourself having to absorb lots of detail.

To deal with this type of person, you need good questioning skills. Constructive interrupting is the key. Without being rude, try to lead the conversation by asking a series of questions to establish facts. You can use questions to reflect back for clarification.

What have I done now?

We all receive negative feedback from time to time. This can range from constructive criticism to verbal attacks. When a critic approaches you, it is helpful to have in mind a way of coping and receiving the criticism.

A technique called 'fogging' can be used as a way of coping with criticism without rising to the bait or becoming defensive or aggressive. It is a way of objectively gathering the information that the critic offers, so that you can go away, digest it and decide on the response that you think is appropriate.

Method: do not deny the criticism, but agree with any true statements or probable truths. For example: 'You might be right; I could have paid more attention'. In this way, you are not necessarily accepting their criticism, just acknowledging that they may have a point. This lack of resistance will give them nothing to retaliate against while you deliberate the matter.

Steps for managing criticism [4]

- Listen to the criticism. Understand the content of the criticism rather than the way in which it has been phrased.
- Decide honestly whether there is truth in the criticism.
- Decide how to deal with the criticism: agree, partially agree or disagree.
- Choose appropriate language when replying. For example, if you say 'you're wrong', this leaves fuel to argue further. Whereas, if you say 'I disagree' they can't argue with your feelings. This is a more constructive way of getting your point across without fuelling an argument.

A final word

Remember that as difficult as others can seem, your behaviour will act to either fuel or pacify difficult situations. Always consider your own behaviour, and its impact on others.

[1] Stephanie Holland and Clare Ward, *Assertiveness: A Practical Approach* (Speechmark Publications Ltd, 2002).

[2] Sue Bishop, *Develop Your Assertiveness* Second Edition (Kogan Page, 2000).

[3] Stephanie Holland and Clare Ward (2002).

[4] Sue Bishop (2000).

Related Items

Related Resources

- [Understanding Conflict](#)